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JOHN BROWN FIFTY YEARS AFTER

BY

JOHN T. MORSE, JR.

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# JOHN BROWN FIFTY YEARS AFTER<sup>1</sup>

BY JOHN T. MORSE, JR.

JOHN BROWN's singular life has been followed by a remarkable immortality. Two mad days at Harper's Ferry, then the impressive spectacle of the execution; some striking things written and said during his short imprisonment; — thus much has impelled Americans to an eager study of his life and character. Evidently it is his personality that enthalls, not his historic importance, which was trifling; for his Virginia raid startled and passed like a flash of lightning which enters the earth without visible effect. Mr. Villard truly says that psychologists find in him 'a field for inquiry and speculation without end'; the historian, however, dismisses him with a few pages. Yet not half a dozen of all our statesmen, warriors, and writers who played effective parts between 1850 and 1865 have found so many biographers as have tried to tell Brown's story, no one of whom, to speak truth without courtesy, prior to Mr. Villard, has done really good work.

Dr. Rhodes, discouraged probably by contemplating the shelf which held the John Brown literature, wrote that 'a century may perchance pass before an historical estimate acceptable to all lovers of liberty and justice can be made of John Brown.' The dispassionate pages in which these very words occurred came near to disproving them; and now Mr. Villard, 'fifty years after' Brown's death, and very few years

after Dr. Rhodes's remark, has completed the disproof. Not that Mr. Villard has spoken the last word; for Brown's career, affecting differently the different temperaments of writers, will forever remain a subject of discussion; but he probably has made a final presentment of the case. No narrative can ever be more full and accurate; no exposition of arguments and points of view more fair and even-minded.

The chief contribution making by modern writers to the advancement of historical work, exceeding even the fruits brought by the delving specialist, is the temperate, conscientious, honorable purpose to tell exact truth and suggest unbiased conclusions. Even the historical biographer, generally led to his subject by admiration, appreciates how often extravagant laudation has insidiously betrayed 'the good name of many a worthy man, who might have been well esteemed had not the praise-mongers vexed readers into contradictory temper. Mr. Villard, shrewd and honest, neither idolater nor showman, gives John Brown just as John Brown was, in the flesh and in the spirit, and then kindly leaves us to give praise or blame as we will.

Brown himself praised no one; he did not indeed often or greatly praise even the God of whom he spoke in nearly every hour of every day; for his conception of God was of a Being too fully occupied in imposing duties and exacting performance, to endure that time should be wasted in praise-bearing. He himself, fully sympathizing

<sup>1</sup> *John Brown: a Biography Fifty Years After.* By OSWALD GARRISON VILLARD. 738 pp., with complete bibliography and notes. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1910.

with this habit of a God whom he had made quite after his own image, practical, energetic, stern, and inflexible, may to-day be interested in the judgments which are now being pronounced upon him among living men; but it is not conceivable that he much cares whether they are exalting him or not.

Mr. Villard conducts his narrative with much particularity, making the reader the constant companion of Brown throughout. As a farmer, especially as a sheep-raiser and wool-seller, he was exceptionally skillful; but the many speculations in business and in lands into which his 'migratory, sanguine,' restless temperament led him, resulted generally in loss and litigation, so that the procession of his law-suits is startling. The story shows well his incapacity for putting himself in the other man's place; his points of view were always fixed points, and all his opinions were convictions. Thus it happened that though, as Mr. Villard says, there is 'no allegation of dishonesty,' there was sometimes danger that his honesty might be chiefly conspicuous in his intentions. A neighbor and creditor described him as 'of ordinary calibre, with a propensity to business failure.' Dr. Von Holst, writing of him well from the point of view of an admirer, attributes to him a 'sober, wary judgment'; but Dr. Rhodes finds him 'of moderate intellectual capacity' and 'narrow-minded.'

These years when Brown was engaged in ordinary occupations, and when therefore he was to be judged by ordinary standards, establish the correctness of Dr. Rhodes's estimate. Yet Brown's own estimate, in the few but very remarkable autobiographic pages in which he sketches his earlier years, is perhaps the best of all, and indicates that he had singular self-knowledge, and in fact knew himself better than the commentators have known him.

He wrote that John 'followed up with tenacity whatever he set about'; that he 'rarely failed in some good degree to effect the things he undertook'; that therefore he 'habitually expected to succeed'; but 'with this feeling should be coupled the consciousness that our plans are right in themselves,' a consciousness which never failed Brown so long as the breath of life was in him. Later he adds that he 'came forward to manhood quite full of self-conceit, and self-confident,' and 'too much disposed to speak in an imperious or dictating way.' 'Conceit' is hardly a well-selected word, but faith in his own opinions and plans Brown had beyond all limit.

Brown says that at the age of twelve he became an abolitionist. Thereafter he grew rapidly more and more intensely devoted to abolition; he made his children vow themselves to it; he was active in the business of the 'underground railroad'; he had schemes for educating and colonizing negroes at the north, and took up his residence in the Adirondacks, where he hoped to found a settlement of these people, chiefly runaway slaves. When, in the 'dark and bloody' days in Kansas, four of his sons undertook to farm there, he promptly followed, not indeed to settle in that troubled land, but to take a hand in the murderous strife there waging, — a hand which soon approved itself so strenuous and bloody that no other Free-State partisan could vie with the reputation of Brown in the terrible competition of shooting, burning, and plundering. His name became like that of the Black Douglas on the Scotch-English marches.

The only virtue then visible in that unhappy land was physical courage, and even this often paraded in odious companionship with shameful acts. None the less Brown gave himself to the dreadful work of the Lord with

that unsparing thoroughness so often born of religion. From infancy almost he had been an untiring student of the Bible; his familiarity with the Old Testament was wonderful; quotations from both the Old and the New were ever on his tongue, and it is characteristic that his especial favorite was: 'Without blood there shall be no remission of sin.' Unfortunately the Old Testament is a dangerous book for a man of his temperament; and the merciless old Hebrews who wrote it, and whose fierce careers furnished so many incidents for it, were the worst possible comrades for Brown with his intense nature and literal intellect. In their violent fellowship he was sure soon to be embroiled in serious mischief. The sword of the Lord and of Gideon, though doubtless an exceeding good weapon in those days of the bad Midianites, was an antiquated implement in a civilized land nearly nineteen centuries after the New Testament had rendered the armory of the Old Testament an anachronism. Brown, however, knowing nothing of anachronisms, but well assured that he knew all about this holy sword, grasped it at once with both hands.

Mr. Villard takes us through the Kansas period almost day by day, with minute details of Brown's incessant comings and goings, his many concealments and aliases. Nicolay and Hay speak of these doings as theatrical. It may, however, be remembered that Mr. Lincoln spoke very coolly of Brown, and Lincoln's biographers may have taken their tendency from this. Probably the phantasmagoric element was due only to the mental excitement which drove Brown to eternal movement. Certainly he was hideously genuine when he organized the massacre at Pottawotomie. He, with four of his sons and three other persons, enticed at night five unarmed pro-slavery men

from their homes and hacked them to death with cutlasses. Brown led the band, commanded the killing, but himself probably did none of it.

Even in the Kansas of 1856, and among Free-State men, such a slaughter was received with horror; and to-day there is no price which would not be gladly paid by Brown's admirers if thereby the foul deed could be blotted forever from the memories of men. It has therefore always been matter of special interest to know what each successive biographer would say of this:—may not some one, some day, arise to excuse it? Unfortunately there is more in the case than even the brutal killing. There is the shock of seeing Brown, with that stern paternal authority for which he was noted, bid his sons do the hideous slashing. Moreover, though there was little chivalry mingled with Kansas courage, the odium of cowardliness clings about the deed. For further humiliation, Brown always alleged that he had not raised his hand against any man that night. Reports of his phraseology indicate that his words were carefully chosen to be true in the letter and false in the spirit, and certainly they long deceived his Eastern friends into a belief that the blood-stain was not upon him. It would have been better if he had himself struck down his victims; better if he had then availed himself of the ordinary privilege of a criminal to give a simple conventional denial, instead of sneaking behind a quibbling equivocation.

All this is a trying test for Mr. Villard, who certainly meets it admirably. His narrative is precise and full, with no color infused into it by the manner of telling. Every argument, suggestion, and point of view, *pro* and *con*, is stated with perfect evenness. One seems to be present at a great criminal cause, when an able and upright judge, in his charge, reviews with judicial clearness

all facts and all considerations. There is no futile attempt at palliation, where the only possible palliation must be sought in Brown's mental condition. 'God is my judge,' Brown said, nor ever evinced anxiety as to the judgment. Later he said, 'I had no choice. It has been decreed by Almighty God, ordained from eternity, that I should make an example of these men.' Further than this he did not go in shifting the responsibility upon God; but one of his biographers has been less self-restrained, alleging that the great Ruler 'makes his will known in advance to certain chosen men and women who perform it, consciously or unconsciously.' Of course if Brown was the attorney of God, he is justified; but as his credentials cannot be brought into court, his only defense fails. Mr. Villard, in honest man-fashion, says:—

'For John Brown no plea can be made that will enable him to escape coming before the bar of historical judgment. There his wealth of self-sacrifice and the nobility of his aims do not avail to prevent a complete condemnation of his bloody crime at Pottawotamie, or a just penalty for his taking human life without warrant or authority. If he deserves to live in history, it is not because of his cruel, gruesome, reprehensible acts on the Pottawotamie, but despite them.'

To this period belong also the strange proceedings at Chatham, Canada West. There in two successive 'Conventions' Brown gathered some four dozen men, chiefly negroes, and caused them by vote to adopt 'A Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the People of the United States,' whereby was gravely established a skeleton government, with organic laws, a Congress, and a Judiciary, and regulations for making treaties; with the proviso, however, that all this was not to be construed so as in any way to encourage the

overthrow of any State Government, or of the General Government of the United States.' Only 'Amendment and Repeal' were sought; and the flag 'that our Fathers fought under in the Revolution' was to be retained. Brown was chosen Commander-in-chief; Secretaries of State, of War, etc., were selected, and many military commissions were signed in blank. Mr. Villard says there is much to admire in this surprising document; but the presence of high moralities therein does not prevent him, as it had not previously prevented Von Holst, from noting the evidence of a mind not entirely sane or normal. This habit of documentary formality was very persistent with Brown, and seems to indicate a longing for orderly lines of thought and action in spite of a painful incapacity for carrying out the instinct.

Only news of an assassination has ever so startled our people as did the news of the raid upon Harper's Ferry. No popular rumor ran before it; only a few persons, contributors to what would now be called a 'blind pool,' were in uneasy expectation of the explosion of some mysterious, desperate scheme. It was on Sunday, October 16, 1859, that Brown led out his little band of eighteen men from the Kennedy farm in Maryland, where they had been lurking several weeks. Their sudden attack upon the arsenal, occupied, not garrisoned, only by civilian employees, was easily successful; but not many hours later it became evident even to Brown that they had only ensconced themselves in a trap which was already closed. On Tuesday all was over; ten of the raiders were slain or mortally wounded, two of these being sons of Brown; five, including Brown, were prisoners; the others were saving themselves by flight.

So sudden had the mad enterprise been, and so promptly was it brought to naught, that for the moment bewild-

erment rested upon all, — bewilderment which changed into astonishment as knowledge concerning the plot was gathered, showing the folly of it, the incredible stupidity. Mr. Villard's exposition of these conditions, especially as showing the state of Brown's mind up to the close of the incident, is most interesting. It was three or four years since the plan had occurred to him; yet with so much time for thought, he seems to have done no thinking. So far as concerned preparing a scheme, all had been blundering; as for plans for subsequent action, whether in case of failure or success, all had been vagueness. He had been driven blindly forward by an uncontrollable desire to do an *act*; but when it came to devising an effective act, or a feasible manner of doing it, or any way of escaping from miscarriage or of improving success, his ideas had lapsed into chaos, his mind had become pitifully helpless.

Naturally the cry of 'madman' arose on all sides; and equally of course Brown's counsel, in the trial which immediately ensued, wished to set up insanity, the only possible defense. But Brown decisively forbade it, and the popular cry quickly ceased. So he was tried, convicted, and executed as a sane man; and ever since has been written about, praised, blamed, judged as a sane man, a fanatic certainly, too exalted to be altogether of normal mind, but responsibly intelligent, and entitled to credit, or subject to discredit, for all that he did or said. He is habitually called a Crusader, a Roundhead, a Covenanter, or a Puritan, living out of time, but never nowadays a lunatic. None the less the question was not settled either by Brown's negation or by the sudden silence of the people. His opinion was of no account; for if he was insane he certainly did not know it. There was reason also why

the cry of 'madman' should die away so soon as there was time for reflection. For this theory robbed the slavery men of a victim, and the anti-slavery men of a martyr. So likewise in these later days, the establishment of Brown's insanity would deprive the world of a hero. In the face of such a possible loss it may be well not to treat the point as being in doubt; yet, if to what we have seen of Brown's mental workings we add the fact that there was much insanity among his kindred, it must be admitted that a modern criminal lawyer, with his cohort of alienist subsidiaries, would probably be well content to take the case for the defense.

Whatever feeling of admiration, condemnation, or repulsion may be entertained toward Brown prior to his capture, only one sentiment can be evoked by the closing weeks; Dr. Rhodes's 'century' is not needed for that ripening. Yet how near it was to being lost! Lieutenant Green, hurrying to the attack, snatched his dress-sword instead of his heavy cavalry sabre. With the light weapon he wounded Brown severely in the head, and bent the blade; the sabre would have done more deadly work. In the latter case, as Mr. Villard truly says, Brown would soon have been forgotten; it was by what came after that skirmish that his apotheosis was assured.

It has been often said that if Christ's life of humane teaching had not been closed by a crucifixion, there would have been no Christian religion. Brown's worshipers are not backward with their parallel. If Brown's violent career had not been followed by his execution, there would have been no — *what*? What, indeed? a question that cannot be shirked, if Dr. Rhodes's 'estimate' is to be established. What has resulted for mankind from his life and his death? There are various points of view. There is the practical one, of his influence



upon the course of events. As to this the fact must be admitted that everything would have happened just as in fact it did happen, if Brown had never lived and never been hanged. For the historian the Harper's Ferry raid is a mere episode, a spectacular incident, without consequences. There did, however, grow out of it a popular influence of much though indefinite value, which found expression in that famous war-song which perpetuated his name as a symbol.

Brown himself, gathering his wits with surprising clearness after the sudden, confounding disappointment of his disaster, amid shattered hopes and suffering from wounds, knew at once his unexpected usefulness. 'I am worth inconceivably more to hang than for any other purpose,' he said, shrewdly and gallantly; and he saw in his personal failure and sacrifice of life a link cleverly forged by God in the long chain of His purpose. He was content.

Another and important point of view relates to what Brown left behind him for later generations of mankind. If he has given them a grand ideal, a noble example of self-devotion in the cause of humanity, then his usefulness may be even greater than he ever hoped for, though in a way quite undreamed of by him. The present tendency seems to be in the direction of immortalizing him as a hero, and heroes are well worth having, even if, in order to do so, there is need of some forgetting and much forgiving. It is unfortunately true that for Brown's apotheosis much must be forgotten, and even more must be forgiven. Upon the platform of the gallows he still stood responsible for Pottawotomie. Up to the time when he was taken prisoner, one must have the temperament of an enthusiast to admire him; thereafter, however, there is a somewhat different atmosphere. The element of tenderness, which had run like a

fine (alas, too fine!) thread through his stern, inexorable nature, now found better expression in noble and touching letters to his family. There was perceptible a tendency to persuade himself and others that he had been more averse to bloodshed than the story of his life would indicate; yet there was not the slightest symptom of remorse for any of his deeds of violence; indeed, there could not properly or logically be any remorse when he had been merely an instrument to do God's will, and his absolute certainty that this was the case remained unshaken to his last breath. It was characteristic, that even now he could not see his lifelong error in condemning the abolitionists who used only words, though his own acts of violence had led only to a ruin which was humiliatingly fruitless; to the end he could neither learn a lesson nor acknowledge a mistake.

Finally he faced death with perfect gallantry; indeed, he could not have done otherwise after having so long dealt lightly with mere life, whether in taking it from his enemies, or in encouraging his sons and followers to risk and lose it. Even his Southern opponents chivalrously admitted that his sincerity and his courage rendered his closing days grand and impressive.

In these ultimate scenes Mr. Villard at last finds and takes his opportunity. Throughout his book he has borne himself with conscientious self-restraint. But with Brown in prison and sure to be hanged, he feels no longer the need of the judicial poise; at last he is free to write as his feelings dictate, and to use in his picture the colors which he is sure belong there. He has taken us through the story of his hero's life, without once telling us that it is of a hero that we are reading; but now, when it seems to him utterly impossible that we should not recognize the fact, why should he not sympathetically join



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with us in generous and frank appreciation? Now, too, we see how wise he has been in the structure of that narrative which at times we may have thought a little wearisomely minute; for by putting us into neighborly, daily companionship with Brown, he has caused us unconsciously to imbibe that personal interest which may beget a kindly sentiment even where there is not quite approval. As the narrative then expands in approaching Harper's Ferry, we begin to get the sense of an impending doom, and soon the final events unroll with the awe and pathos of impressive fate. The story has the

movement of its simple presentation of the sense of business, then its vague foreboding of terrible disaster, and finally its grand and fatal close. Perhaps in thus dramatically fashioning his volume Mr. Villard obeyed an instinct rather than acted upon a preconceived plan; that is often the case with great work, where a writer's feelings are deeply enlisted. Be this as it may, the merit and charm are none the less; he has seized well a splendid opportunity and has written one of the great biographies of our literature.